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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

U. S. Department of Agriculture  
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Subject: "How to Use a Recipe." Approved by Bureau of Home Economics, U.S.D.A.

--ooOoo--

The other morning I received a letter from a friend who told me all her troubles -- all her cooking troubles. She had made a cake, and it fell flat, and it wouldn't have been any good if it hadn't fallen flat, because it didn't taste right. All in all, my friend was much discouraged. She is just learning to cook, "and," she says, "it's so wasteful to have to throw away what you cook. What do you suppose was wrong with my recipe?"

I don't want to hurt her feelings -- but I think the recipe was all right. Recipes are tested nowadays, before they are included in reliable cookbooks. Yes, I feel sure that the recipe was O.K., but my young friend didn't know how to use it.

Since she is just learning to cook, it's rather important that she follow the recipe exactly, using just the proportions given, and measuring accurately. (I know that many of our best cooks never measure, but I'm not talking to them -- they don't need any help. They can cook "by guess and by golly," and turn out dishes that are true masterpieces.)

But the amateur cook needs an accurate measuring cup, and spoons that measure from one-fourth teaspoon to one tablespoon. Then she must learn how to use her cup and her spoons. Measure flour, for instance, (except whole wheat and bran,) after it has been sifted once. Measure teaspoonfuls or tablespoonfuls by dipping the spoon more than full, and then leveling with the edge of a knife. If you want to measure a half-spoonful, fill the spoon level and divide lengthwise, with a knife.

Now, how to measure solid fat, like butter? I've seen cooks spend a long time bringing half a cup of butter to the half-way mark in a cup. It's much simpler and quicker to fill the cup exactly half full of water, and then put in the fat. When the water reaches the one-cup mark, you know that you have half a cup of butter. Pour off the water, and there's the right amount of fat.

It's easy to measure butter and margarine that come in four quarter-pound strips, for each strip equals half a cup. Remember, too, when you measure ingredients, that all measurements are level, and that you can use one cup for all ingredients, if you measure dry ingredients before fats, and fats before sirups.

Another point for the amateur cook. Have a clock in the kitchen -- an alarm clock, if you need to be reminded when to take your cake out of the oven. Have a good thermometer too -- an oven thermometer doesn't cost a great deal -- the price of a few burnt cakes. Special thermometers are handy for candy-making, deep-fat frying, and roasting meats.



Of course, in order to use a recipe intelligently, the amateur cook should know the meaning of culinary terms -- parboiling, pan-broiling, sauteing, frying, and so on. She should know that sauteing is cooking in a small amount of fat, that frying is cooking in enough fat to cover the food.

She must know how to handle ingredients, too. If the recipe states: "Cream half a cup of butter," our student cook should know that it's best to take the butter out of the refrigerator and let it become soft in a warm room, and then to rub it in a mixing bowl, back and forth, with the back of a wooden spoon, until the butter is creamy.

She should know how to chop and grind, and cut and fold, to mince onions or parsley, to grate cheese or lemon or orange rind, to separate the whites of eggs from the yolks, to whip cream.

Of course this seems very elementary to "natural born cooks," or to those who have studied the art of cookery at home or in school -- but there are many others. Just last Saturday a young woman dashed over to see me -- a cookbook in her hand. "How do you melt chocolate?" she asked, "and tell me what's wrong with brown sugar that's full of lumps?"

I explained that chocolate should be melted at low temperature -- on top of the oven or over steam. Another good way to melt chocolate is in the top of a double boiler, over hot water, if you're adding other ingredients to it, so you won't leave a lot of the chocolate sticking to the pan. And never, never melt chocolate directly over heat.

As for the lumps in the brown sugar -- spread it out on a bread board and crush with a rolling pin. Then sift the sugar; if lumps remain, roll them again.

Now, to come back to the recipes. Even if you can measure accurately, even if you know the meaning of cooking terms and how to carry out cooking processes, there are still a few points to keep in mind. Let's take a few of the more common ingredients in a recipe -- flour, for instance. Unless otherwise specified, the flour used in recipes is an all-purpose or family flour, made from a blend of wheat. The fat or shortening used in cakes, muffins, and cookies is usually butter or olcomargarine. The milk is sweet whole milk. If you use skim milk, the amount of fat in the recipe will be cut slightly. If you use evaporated or dried milk, instead of whole fresh milk, be sure that you dilute it according to the directions on the can.

The sugar is fine-grained granulated sugar, either cane or beet. (The quality is the same.)

One more hint for the beginner. If you double a recipe, or if you cut it in half, be sure that you double or halve all the ingredients. Better write down the new proportions and keep them in plain sight. You'll never know till you've left it out -- (or left it in) -- how much difference a few teaspoons of baking powder can make!

Well, as my philosophical neighbor says, nothing takes the place of a few years of cooking, if you're going to learn to cook. Nobody can tell you how -- but a good cookbook, followed carefully, is a big help.

